

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL RYAN NICHOLS, COMMANDER OF THE 738 AIR EXPEDITIONARY ADVISORY SQUADRON FOR THE POHANTOON-E-HAWAEE AFGHAN AIR FORCE AIR SCHOOL VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN SUBJECT: THE AFGHAN AIR FORCE AIR SCHOOL TIME: 10:30 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2010

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CHRISTEN MCCLUNEY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Hello, I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, October 28th, 2010. My name is Christen McCluney with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

A note to bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question. Respect our guests' time, keeping questions succinct and to the point, and please place your phones on mute when you're not asking questions.

Today, our guest is Lieutenant Colonel Ryan Nichols, commander of the Afghan Air Force Air School. He will discuss the specialized training facility in Afghanistan where Afghans teach Afghans and Americans serve as advisers. We're pleased to have our guest today. Sir, please start with any remarks, and then we will go into questions. The floor is yours.

COL. NICHOLS: Yeah, hi. Thank you. Lieutenant Colonel Ryan Nichols. I'm the commander of the 738th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron, and what that means, it's an adviser squadron, and my counterpart in the Afghan air force is the Pohantoon-E-Hawee, the PEH, which is the Afghan air force's air university concept. It's their primary school to train Afghan air force members for their future Afghan air force career. And I'm the commander of the mentor -- adviser squadron that teams with the Afghans on that side.

I've been here about a month or so, and I'm ready for your questions.

MS. MCCLUNEY: All right. Thank you, sir.

Bruce, you were first on the line. You can go ahead.

Q Good evening there, Colonel. Colonel, I was curious what your background is in the Air Force and what kind of specialized training, you know, or mentoring did you have to take on this assignment.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Yeah. Hi Bruce. Thanks. Good question. I -- my background, I'm an F-16 pilot by trade and have grown up doing -- you know, as an Air Force pilot, kind of a pipeline, normal pipeline for an Air Force pilot and then I've flown F-16s since, oh gosh, 1995 or thereabouts.

You know, so in that, you know, I became an instructor, supervisor-type guy within that community. And then as -- you know, as this advisor role has grown over the last couple of years, that became a -- kind of a big push to get some folks advising the Afghan Air Force.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: And then specialty training for us, once we are kind of either, you know, volunteered or selected to come over here and do this, we go through basically a month-long adviser course to prepare for, you know, the academic and the cultural and all things in order to prepare us for the mission over here.

Q Okay.

MS. MCCLUNEY: All right. Jeff, you were next on the line.

Q Thank you. Just so we're on the same page, this school is separate from schools that teach pilots?

LT. COL. NICHOLS: It is a -- let's call it -- call it an introductory, meaning that right now, the way the Afghan pilots are being produced since the air force, their air force is so young and it just recently started off as -- it branched off from the ANA, the Afghan National Army and technically it's still a subdivision of the Afghan National Army. So that the whole Afghan air force concept is so young that as far as pilot development goes, the pilots do as officers, they do some initial academic introductory course with us. They do some English training here in Kabul but then there's no pilot training vehicle yet set up here to do that. That's coming pretty soon, but as of right now, those folks -- the qualified candidates are going elsewhere for pilot training, whether that be the United States or UAE or U.K., they're being farmed out.

Now, that's one of our big projects is getting them going on pilot production.

So to answer your question, they do -- the folks that are going to be the pilots do come through us and then they branch and go elsewhere for the final pilot training piece.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Does that answer your question?

Q Yes. Do you do any kind of like AFSOC training here, teaching people to do -- to be -- joint terminal attack controllers or parachute jumpers or linguists, anything like that?

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Nothing quite detailed or technical. The main -- the school, I think, as the article, introductory article said, is kind of divided into three pillars. We have a professions pillar, which is tech training. There's a leadership pillar, which is professional military education, kind of basic military stuff, and then there's the education pillar, which is literacy programs and English programs. So those are three main -- now, within that professions pillar, we have quite a bit of the technical training courses on maintenance and some aviation things and a lot of mission support. Now, within that mission support function, we do have a forward observer course, which is the very, very introductory level training that Afghan air force guys will get to become forward observers.

The follow-on and hopefully the evolution of that will lead to some point to do the JTEC, the JTEC course, but it's not there. We're not there yet. It's the very introductory type content for JTEC training.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MS. MCCLUNEY: Bruce, do you have another question?

Q Sure. Colonel, could you talk about the leadership courses you offer, if those are kind of modeled on what folks have recognized from the U.S. Air Force? Are there things about the Afghan, you know, their culture that make you organize a different way?

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Yeah, I mean, as far as leadership and training, you know, we've kind of -- as we're developing the Afghan air force, the force development for those guys, you know, as far as the enlisted force structure goes, all -- well, and for the officers as well -- everyone comes in and they do a one month introductory, it's the air orientation course, which is an introduction to air force concepts and history and air power type thing.

So everybody goes through that and we consider that one of our leadership courses. Now, branching, if you look at the enlisted side, the force development model for a young airman or a young enlisted soldier is at some point they'll progress into an NCO and we do have -- it's called a team leader course, which is kind of the next phase of PME professional military education that those guys will go through.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Okay. After that, right now, right now, there's nothing developed and that's one of my jobs here in the next year is to -- is to develop the next level of training, like in the U.S., we have NCO academies and senior NCO academies and schools, specialty schools for those ranks. Right now, the Afghan air force doesn't have that, so we're going to help them -- help them develop that.

On the officer side, similar concept, we do an introductory course, you know, for young lieutenants. Actually anybody entering, but basically young lieutenants get it. And then, you know, I'm not sure how familiar you are, but the SOS squadron officer schools, the IDEACSC schools and then senior officer type courses, same deal. Those are not --

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: -- not developed yet.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Soon, soon, hopefully, they will be.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Does that kind of get at what you're talking about?

Q Yeah.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: So we're getting there. And then the idea, the idea is to build a profession, you know, is to give them the technical training, the education with the literacy and the English and that piece, and then also the leadership training, which is where that PME background will come in.

So it's a work in progress, that's for sure.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MS. MCCLUNEY: Jeff, back around to you if you have another question.

Q No, I'm good. Thank you. MS. MCCLUNEY: Bruce, do you have any other questions?

Q Oh, yeah, yeah. (Laughter.)

MS. MCCLUNEY: Okay.

Q Several. Colonel, let me ask, your squadron there, about - oh, could you describe how many airmen you have, the split between enlisted and officers and what kind of -- I guess also for airmen back in the U.S. reading this, might be -- look at this as an interesting assignment, what kind of backgrounds are good?

LT. COL. NICHOLS: I brag a little, but I think I've got the most unique squadron in the Air Force and here's why. Currently have 40 people assigned and my next 10 folks just arrived today, they're Portuguese, it's a group of 10 Portuguese.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Folks who haven't -- they're not on base yet, but they're in country. So look at it I'll have 50 people assigned to me, 10 Portuguese, some Canadians and then a handful of Air Force, obviously, but then Army and Navy as well and I think I've got a Marine guy coming eventually.

So we've got a mixture, a mixture of backgrounds. I'd say -- and then within those countries, including the U.S., gosh, I'm thinking numbers percentage-wise, you know, probably 25 percent, 25 percent officers, 75 percent enlisted. And even more detailed within that, we have a very strong senior NCO presence because this assignment, the adviser piece takes -- you really have to have some experienced folks, both officer and enlisted.

So the enlisted cadre is really at the heart of the squadron, whatever service or country they're coming from, and they are mostly senior NCOs. We've got a few tech sergeants, but most are master sergeants and, you know, and that's a necessary thing. So, yeah, it's a great, it's a unique, I mean, if you can imagine. It's a very unique mission, which takes some experience and then couple that with all the different countries that are helping us -- yeah, it's very unique, very interesting, very rewarding, as well as challenging.

Q Do your NCOs, do they have both experience either like as working as technical school instructors or military training instructors usually, or --

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Well, you know, we're getting better at picking and trying to figure out, you know, what kind of background and what kind of person as far as an adviser goes we want.

Q Okay. LT. COL. NICHOLS: But really, really, there is no particular criteria. We've got all kinds of backgrounds, maintenance backgrounds -- gosh, computer, you know, computer, comm-type backgrounds.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: And then within those specialties, a lot of the folks have been instructor, you know (T-prefixed ?) qualified folks, but that's really just, honestly, that's a bennie and nice-to-have type thing. No mandatory pre-reqs type thing for it, but that's something that we're looking for.

And I think as this thing progresses and we get, you know, deeper and more involved into the school production, you know, we're going to start looking for folks with education backgrounds, instructor backgrounds, and the kind of the expertise that we need to help develop it.

But right now, at the kind of the stage that the Afghan side is at, a professional -- you know, a professional, trained NCO can do -- can do -- just can do great things. So --

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Now right now that's all we need. Now maybe in the future we'll have to get more specific.

Q Right. Your U.S. Airmen who are there, are you all one-year tours? Or six-month tours? Or --

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Most are one-year tours.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: We do have -- we call them "Pop-Tarts." We do have a few -- (laughs) -- we do have a few six-monthers, but predominately are one-year. And, frankly, the kind of -- the time it takes -- the time it takes to get to know the job and to get to know the people and to get kind of acquainted with the culture and the Afghan timeline is a lot different culturally than -- you know, than our timeline is for getting jobs done. And their views on time, that it really -- a year is better than the six-monther because that gives a person a little bit more time here to get their feet in, and then get to know people, and make some changes.

And, frankly, sometimes a year's not even enough because they -- you know, the Afghans will joke about us just, you know, quickly leaving in a year. And --

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: -- to them a year is not very long at all.

Q I was going to -- for your -- for a student there, how long will they be at the school before they -- I guess, they move on to an operational assignment or their next school assignment? LT. COL. NICHOLS: Yeah, kind of standard answer. It depends. But, you know, for example, a young enlisted soldier who -- you know, we call our young, enlisted folks airmen. And I think we're going to try to start as a group calling them that. But we still call them soldiers because they're coming out of the Army. But so a young, enlisted soldier comes in. Most -- the predominant, I'd say, number goes into that one-month orientation course.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Then they do a three-month literacy -- most of them -- literacy course.

And then they'll go on into their follow-on job, you know, duty-specific technical training. So at that point is when it starts really depending. Some of those job-specific training are, you know, maybe a month to six weeks. And some are (outwards ?) maintenance, some of the maintenance things that will go out towards four months, you know, that type of thing.

So the initial part is fairly constant. But then it will depend on where they're going career-wise, job-wise as far as their tech training, and how long they'll stay here before moving on to their -- you know, to their assignment.

Q Okay. And, Colonel, do you have a -- the Afghan airmen, soldiers that come to your course, how they're recruited, why they are in the -- you know, the Afghan air force versus the Afghan army, if it's a decision they made, or someone decided it for them, or -- I don't know if it's competitive to get into the air force.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Well, good question. And one of the big things going on right now is obviously -- recruiting at the ANA, the entire, you know, army level recruiting, on getting better-qualified candidates, and improving that process. But even more specifically within that, we're working here at the wing are involved with an initiative to get basically direct accessions, direct recruiting into, you know, from a high school student off the street, and then recruit them directly into the Afghan Air Force. And that's very -- you know, that's premature. But it's picking up a lot of steam.

So as far as their motivations go, you know, I think probably similar to -- you know, similar to U.S. airmen or a young officer. It's, you know, a duty thing. It's a -- it's a job. It's pay. And I think the -- I do believe the positive -- call it patriotism or, you know, the positive aspect of the symbol of wanting to improve their country. You know, you can at least talk to the young folks, enlisted or officers, you know, that -- who have grown up here, you know, they want -- they do want to serve their country, and make it a better place.

So I do think that all the -- all those things just, like, not really that different other than a lot of these guys are -- a lot of the kids are coming from, you know, much more impoverished upbringings than a U.S. soldier, for instance.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: But I think their reasons are very similar --

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: -- if that makes sense.

Q Yeah. All right. Well, Colonel, I was going to ask -- just on -- going back to your staff, are -- I don't know if your staff are -- folks primarily who volunteered for this assignment, or, you know, just -- you know, got to just, you know, the way the AF assignment system works, because this seems to be --

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Yeah, it's --

Q -- much different than, you know, being told you're going to go, you know, be a crew chief, you know -- well, you know, up at Bagram, or --

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Well, and we -- you know, we have crew chiefs come here. And it's -- you're right. It's part of the AEF. It's part of the AEF deployment system in the one-year -- and it's part of the one-year indeterminate TDY process that folks will get -- kind of get volunteered -- (laughs) -- for a lack of a better word, you know, volunteered to come. If they're due to deploy --

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: -- and, you know, they're hot on the list, then, yeah, a lot of folks are picking up these one-year tours without just directly volunteering. And there are people who are raising their hands and doing it, too, but I'd say the majority is through the one-year, you know, AEF process.

Q I guess this is considered --

LT. COL. NICHOLS: For me, it's a little different. For the command, it was more a volunteer-and-go-do-it kind of thing. But most of the folks are just -- are through the AEF system, yeah. Q I guess this would be the equivalent of a -- of a -- of a one-year unaccompanied tour, as far as the personnel system looks at it, and --

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Yeah, as far as that goes, it is considered a -- it's considered a TDY still.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: It's a one-year TDY deployment, so you get remote credit, but it is considered a TDY.

Q Okay. Just, Colonel, as far as -- oh, you mention you have about -- well, 40 U.S. airmen, and then there's others.

Altogether, what's the size of the squadron?

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Well, for the mentors, the advisers, there's 50. There will be 50 when there's -- when my Portuguese guys join us here tomorrow or the next day. So 50 advisers. The Afghans -- oh gosh. Here, let me look real quick. What they -- how many people they actually have and how many are on the books are sometimes two different things. Let me -- looking at some papers here.

MS. MCCLUNEY: Okay. Thank you all. We've had some great comments and questions today. We're going to wrap up today's call, so I'd like to ask Lieutenant Colonel Ryan Nichols if you have any final comments.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Yeah, I'm sorry, just to finish that one, that last one off. We've got about -- I want to say around 70 Afghans in the squadron, and that's going to grow quite a bit next year.

Q And they're working --

LT. COL. NICHOLS: -- to answer the last question.

Q -- and they're working as mentors, instructors.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: I'm sorry. What did you say again?

Q Oh, the 70 Afghans, those are working as mentors and as instructors?

LT. COL. NICHOLS: No, well, they're school staff.

Q Oh, school staff. Okay. Thanks. Okay.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: There are some that are instructors. But mostly they're school administrators and school staff. The instructors are growing, and most of those are actually contract instructors. But those are mainly administrative. Q Okay. All right. Well, Colonel, sounds like you've got a fascinating job.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: (Laughs.) I do. I know. It's really -- you know, I knew it was going to be a unique and a great job coming over here. But then once you get over here, it's even -- you know, once you kind of get boots on the ground and see it, it's -- yeah, it's -- it is fascinating and the most unique thing.

And I -- you know, I've heard guys -- I've heard generals say it, and, you know, kind of what's going on in Afghanistan as far as the strategy and what we're doing, the whole adviser mission, you know, the -- it's one of the most rewarding -- you know, it's one of the most rewarding things you can be involved with -- you know, doing this piece, you know, for the Afghan Air Force.

So, yeah, I'm enjoying it so far.

Q Okay. Well, thank you for taking the time.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: All right. Thank you.

MS. MCCLUNEY: Thank you, sir. Today's program will be available at the Bloggers Roundtable link on DODLive.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as bios, this audio file and print transcript.

Thank you, sir, and our bloggers and journalists who participated today. This concludes today's event. Thank you.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. COL. NICHOLS: Okay. Thank you. Hi to my family. See you guys. Bye.

Q Bye.

END.